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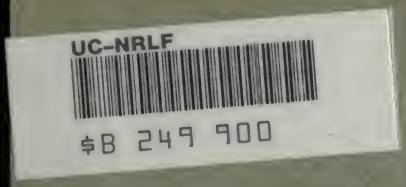

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THE MARTYR:

A Drama,

IN THREE ACTS.

BY JOANNA BAILLIE,

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PREFACE.

Of all the principles of human action, Religion is the strongest. It is often, indeed, overcome by others, and even by those which may be considered as very weak antagonists; yet, on great emergencies it surmounts them all, and it is master of them all for general and continued operation. In every country and nation, under some form or other, though often dark and distorted, it holds warfare with vice and immorality; either by destroying corrupted selfishness, or by rendering it tributary. And dear and intolerable to the feelings of nature are the tributes it will voluntarily offer, — fasting, scourging, wounds and humiliation;—the humiliation of all worldly distinction, when the light of reason as well as the robe of dignity are thrown aside. A great philosophical writer * of our own days, after having mentioned some of the sceptical works of Hume, says, "Should not rather the melancholy histories which he has exhibited of the follies and caprices of superstition, direct our attention to

* Stewart's Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind, vol. i. p. 368.

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those sacred and indelible characters of the human mind, which all these perversions of reason are unable to obliterate —? * * * * In truth, the more striking the contradictions and the more ludicrous the ceremonies, to which the pride of human reason has thus been reconciled, the stronger is our evidence that Religion has a foundation in the nature of man. * * * * * * * Where are those truths in the whole circle of the sciences, which are so essential to human happiness, as to procure an easy access, not only for themselves, but for whatever opinions may happen to be blended with them? Where are the truths so venerable and commanding, as to impart their own sublimity to every mode of expression by which they are conveyed; and which, in whatever scene they have habitually occupied the thoughts, consecrate every object which it presents to our senses, and the very ground we have been accustomed to tread? To attempt to weaken the authority of such impressions, by a detail of the endless variety of forms which they derive from casual association, is surely an employment unsuitable to the dignity of philosophy. To the vulgar it may be amusing in this as in other instances, to indulge their wonder at what is new or uncommon; but to the philosopher it belongs to perceive, under all these various disguises, the workings of the same common nature; and in the superstitions of

Egypt no less than in the lofty visions of Plato, to recognize the existence of those moral ties which unite the heart of man to the Author of his being."

Many various circumstances, which it suits not my present purpose to mention, have produced this combination of gloomy, cruel, and absurd superstitions with Religion, even in nations and eras possessing much refinement of literature and perfection of the arts. But Religion, when more happily situated, grows from a principle into an affection, — an exalted, adoring devotion; and is then to be regarded as the greatest and noblest emotion of the heart. Considering it in this light, I have ventured, with diffidence and awe, to make it the subject of the following Drama.

The Martyr, whom I have endeavoured to pourtray, is of a class which I believe to have been very rare, except in the first ages of Christianity. There have been many Martyrs in the world. Some have sacrificed their lives for the cause of Reformation in the Church, with the zeal and benevolence of patriotism: some for the maintenance of its ancient doctrines and rites, with the courage of soldiers in the breach of their beleaguered city: some for intricate points of doctrine, with the fire of controvertists, and the honour of men who disdained to compromise what they believed to be the truth, or under im-

pressions of conscience which they durst not disobey; but, from the pure devoted love of God, as the great Creator and benevolent Parent of men, few have suffered but when Christianity was in its simplest and most perfect state, and more immediately contrasted with the mean, cheerless conceptions and popular fables of Paganism.

We may well imagine that, compared to the heathen deities, those partial patrons of nations and individuals, at discord amongst themselves, and invested with the passions and frailties of men, the great and only God, Father of all mankind, as revealed in the Christian Faith, must have been an idea most elevating, delightful, and consonant to every thing noble and generous in the human understanding or heart. Even to those who, from the opinions of their greatest philosophers, had soared above vulgar belief to one universal God, removed in his greatness from all care or concern for his creatures, the character of the Almighty God and beneficent Parent joined, who cares for the meanest of his works, must have been most animating and sublime, supposing them to be at the same time unwarped by the toils and pride of learning.

But when the life and character of Jesus Christ, so different from every character that had ever appeared upon earth, was unfolded to them

as the Son, and sent of God, — sent from Heaven to declare his will on earth, and with the love of an elder brother, to win us on to the attainment of an exalted state of happiness, which we had forfeited, — sent to suffer and intercede for benighted wanderers, who were outcasts from their Father's house ; can we conceive mingled feelings of gratitude, adoration, and love, more fervent, and more powerfully commanding the soul and imagination of man, than those which must then have been excited by this primitive promulgation of the Gospel? Such converts, too, were called from the uncertain hope (if hope it might be termed) of a dreary, listless, inactive existence after death, so little desirable, that their greatest poet makes his noblest hero declare, he would prefer being the meanest hind who breathes the upper air, to the highest honours of that dismal state.

" Through the thick gloom his friend Achilles knew,
And as he speaks the tears descend in dew;
Com'st thou alive to view the Stygian bounds,
Where the wan spectres walk eternal rounds ;
Nor fear'st the dark and dismal waste to tread,
Throng'd with pale ghosts, familiar with the dead?
To whom with sighs : I pass these dreadful gates
To seek the Theban, and consult the fates :
For still distress'd I roam from coast to coast,
Lost to my friends, and to my country lost.

But sure the eye of time beholds no name
So bless'd as thine in all the rolls of fame;
Alive we hail'd thee with our guardian gods,
And dead, thou rul'st a king in these abodes.
Talk not of ruling in this dolorous gloom,
Nor think vain words (he cried) can ease my doom;
Rather I'd choose laboriously to bear
A weight of woes, and breathe the vital air,
A slave to some poor hind that toils for bread,
Than reign the scepter'd monarch of the dead." *

They were called, I repeat it, from hopes like these to the assurance of a future life, so joyful, active, spiritual and glorious, that the present faded in the imagination from before it as a shadow. "Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart, the joy that is prepared for those who love God," is one of the many expressions of the Christian apostles on this lofty theme; who counted the greatest happiness of the present life as unworthy to be compared to the rewards of the righteous after death, where, according to their different degrees of worth, unsullied with any feeling of envy, they should shine in their blessedness as one star differeth from another star in glory. A transition from prospects so mean and depressing as the former to hopes so dignified, spiritual and animating as the latter, might well have a power over the mind which nothing could shake or subdue; and this transition none

* Pope's Odyssey, 11th book.

but the first race of Christians could experience, at least in so great a degree.

And those enlarged conceptions, those ennobling and invigorating hopes came to them in the pure simplicity of the Gospel as taught by Christ and his apostles. They had no subtle points of faith mixed with them as matters of necessary belief, which the fathers of succeeding times, and too often the pious missionaries of the present, have pressed upon their bewildered converts with greater perseverance and earnestness than the general precepts and hopes of Christianity. * Those ancient converts also had

* Dr. Samuel Clarke, in a sermon on the Powers and Wisdom of the Gospel, hath this passage: "And whereas the best and greatest philosophers were in continual disputes, and in many degrees of uncertainty, concerning the very fundamentals and most important doctrines of truth and reason, amongst those, on the contrary, who embraced the Gospel of Christ, there never was the least room for dispute about any fundamental; all Christians at all times and in all places having ever been baptized into the profession of the same faith and into an obligation to obey the same commandments. And it being notorious that all the contentions that ever arose in the Christian world have been merely about several additions which every sect and party, in direct contradiction to the express command of their master, have endeavoured presumptuously to annex by their own authority to his doctrines and to his laws. How much, therefore, and how just ground soever has been given by those who call themselves Christians to the reproach of them which are without, yet Christ himself, that is, the Gospel in its native simplicity as delivered by him, has

before their eyes a testimony of heroic endurance which till then had been unknown to the world. Who, in preceding times, had given his body to the flames for his belief in any religious notions, taught or entertained by the learned or unlearned? It was a thing hitherto unknown to the heathens; and it is not very marvellous that abstract doctrines of philosophers, taught to their disciples as such, or popular deities, many in number, and of local, limited power, with moral attributes ascribed to them inferior to those of a virtuous mortal man, should be little calculated to raise those strong excitements in the mind, from which religious persecutions did at first proceed amongst Christians, who, from intemperate zeal and narrow conceptions, deemed a right belief in every doctrine of the Church necessary to salvation. Diana of the Ephesians could peaceably hold her state in conjunction with any god or goddess of Greece, Scythia, Persia, or Egypt; but this toleration, which proceeded from any cause rather than the excellence of their religion, was changed into the most bloody and ferocious persecution upon

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abundantly to all reasonable persons among the Gentiles manifested itself to be the wisdom of God; as well as it appeared to be the power of God in signs and wonders to the Jews." — Clarke's Sermons, vol. v. Serm. 12th.

the divulging of a faith which was altogether incompatible with their theologies, and must therefore, should it prevail, overturn them entirely. Under these circumstances, the most enlightened Pagans, whose toleration has so often been praised, became the first persecutors, and Christians the first martyrs. And then it was that a new spectacle was exhibited to mankind; then it was that the sublimity of man's immortal soul shone forth in glory which seemed supernatural. Men and women, young and old, suffered for their faith all that flesh and blood can suffer; yea, joyfully and triumphantly.

In beholding such terrific and interesting spectacles, many were led to enquire into the cause of such super-human resolution, and became converts and martyrs in their turn; and it will be found, in the accounts of those ancient persecutions, that many Roman soldiers, and sometimes officers of high rank, were amongst the earlier Christians who laid down their lives for their religion. It was indeed natural that the invincible fortitude of those holy sufferers, fronting death with such noble intrepidity, should attract the admiration and sympathy of the generous and brave, whose pride it was to meet death undauntedly in a less terrific form; and we may easily imagine also, that a generous and elevated mind, under the immediate pressure of

such odious tyranny as some of the Roman emperors exercised on their senators and courtiers, would turn from this humiliating bondage to that promise of a Father's house in which there are many mansions, and turn to it with most longing and earnest aspirations. The brave man, bred in the camp and the field, encompassed with hardships and dangers, would be little encumbered with learning or philosophy, therefore more open to conviction; and when returned from the scenes of his distant warfare, would more indignantly submit to the capricious will of a voluptuous master. These considerations have led me to the choice of my hero, and have warranted me in representing him as a noble Roman soldier: — one whose mind is filled with adoring awe and admiration of the sublime, but parental character of the Deity, which is for the first time unfolded to him by the early teachers of Christianity; — one whose heart is attracted by the beautiful purity, refinement, and benignant tenderness, and by the ineffable generosity of him who visited earth as his commissioned Son, — attracted powerfully, with that ardour of affectionate admiration which binds a devoted follower to his glorious chief.

But though we may well suppose unlearned soldiers to be the most unprejudiced and ardent of the early Christian proselytes, we have good

reason to believe that the most enlightened minds of those days might be strongly moved and attracted by the first view of Christianity in its pure, uncorrupted state. All their previous notions of religion, as has been already said, whether drawn from a popular or philosophical source, were poor and heartless compared to this. Their ideas on the subject, which I have already quoted, having passed through the thoughts and imagination of their greatest poet, could surely contract no meanness nor frigidity there, but must be considered as represented in the most favourable light which their received belief could possibly admit. We must place ourselves in the real situation of those men, previous to their knowledge of the sacred Scripture, and not take it for granted that those elevated conceptions of the Supreme Being and his paternal Providence which modern deists have in fact, though unwilling to own it, received from the Christian revelation, belonged to them. It has been observed by an author, whose name I ought not to have forgotten, that the ideas of the Deity expressed in the writings of philosophers, subsequently to the Christian era, are more clear and sublime than those which are to be found in heathen writers of an earlier period. I therefore represent him also as a Roman, cultivated, contemplative, and refined.

Martyrs of this rank and character were not, I own, mentioned amongst those belonging to the first persecutions under Nero, but in those which followed, during the first and second century of the Christian era, when the stories which had been propagated of the shocking superstitions and wickedness of the sect began to lose their credit. But I conceive myself warranted to take this liberty, as the supposed recentness of the promulgation of the Gospel gives (if I may so express it) a greater degree of zest to the story, and by no means alters the principles and feelings which must have actuated the martyrs, this whole period being still that of pure Christianity unencumbered with many perplexing and contradictory doctrines which followed, when churchmen had leisure to overlay the sacred scriptures with a multitude of explanatory dissertations, and with perverse, presumptuous ingenuity to explain the plain passages by the obscure, instead of the obscure by the plain.

In this representation of religious devotion in its early primitive state, it has been my desire to keep clear from all fanatical excess which in after times too often expressed itself in the wildest incoherent rhapsodies; the language of a natural delirium, proceeding from a vain endeavour to protract, by forced excitement, the

ecstacy of a few short moments, and to make that a continued state of the mind which was intended, by its beneficent Creator, only for its occasional and transient joy. Of this we may be well assured; for if otherwise indulged, it would have rendered men incapable of the duties of social life; those duties which the blessed founder of our religion did so constantly and so earnestly inculcate. That I am too presumptuous in attempting to represent it at all, is a charge which, if it be brought against me, I ought to bear with meekness; for when it first offered itself to my mind as the subject of a drama, I shrunk from it as a thing too sacred to be displayed in such a form. But in often considering the matter, this impression at last gave way to a strong desire of showing the noblest of all human emotions in a light in which it has but seldom been contemplated; and I trust that through the following pages, whatever defects may be found, and no doubt there are many, want of reverence will not be amongst the number.

I would gladly pass over the lyrical part of the piece without remark, were it not that I fear I may have offended the classical reader, by having put into the mouths of Roman soldiers a hymn in honour of their deities so homely and unpoetical. This too will more likely offend,

after the beautiful and splendid effusions on this subject which have been so much and justly admired in a recent drama. But I wished to make them express what I conceived to be the actual feelings and notions of such men regarding the objects of their worship, not the rich descriptive imaginations of a learned and poetical high priest. Besides, had I possessed talents requisite for the successful imitation of such classical affluence, it would scarcely have accorded with the general tenor of the piece and the simplicity of the hymns of the Christians; I should therefore have injured the general effect, as well as the supposed faithfulness of the particular passage, regarding its description of real characters. It at least appears so to me.

I need scarcely observe to the reader, that the subject of this piece is too sacred, and therefore unfit for the stage. I have endeavoured, however, to give it so much of dramatic effect as to rouse his imagination in perusing it to a lively representation of the characters, action, and scenes, belonging to the story; and this, if I have succeeded, will remove from it the dryness of a mere dramatic poem. Had I considered it as fit for theatrical exhibition, the reasons that withhold me from publishing my other manuscript plays, would have held good regarding this.

Before I take leave of my reader, I must be permitted to say, that the following Drama has been written for a long time, and read by a few of my friends several years ago. When Mr. Milman's beautiful drama on a similar subject was published, I began to be afraid that, were I to keep it much longer in manuscript, some other poet, in an age so fertile in poetic genius, might offer to the public that which might approach still nearer to the story of my piece, and give it, when published, not only all its own native defects to contend with, but those also arising from the unavoidable flatness of an exhausted subject. I therefore determined to publish it as soon as other duties permitted me, and many have intervened to prevent the accomplishment of my wish. In preparing it for the press, I have felt some degree of scruple in retaining its original title of *The Martyr*, but I could not well give it any other. The public, I hope, and Mr. Milman, I am certain, are sufficiently my friends not to find fault with this circumstance, which has not arisen from presumption.

THE MARTYR:

A DRAMA, IN THREE ACTS.

PERSONS OF THE DRAMA.

MEN.

NERO, *Emperor of Rome.*
CORDENIUS MARO, *Officer of the Imperial Guard.*
ORCERES, *a Parthian Prince, visiting Rome.*
SULPICIUS, *a Senator.*
SYLVIUS, *a brave Centurion.*
Roman Pontiff.
Christian Father or Bishop, Christian Brother, &c.
A PAGE, *in the family of* Sulpicius.

Senators, Christians, Soldiers, &c.

WOMEN.

PORTIA, *Daughter of* Sulpicius.

Christian Women.

SCENE, ROME.

THE MARTYR.

ACT I.

SCENE I.—*A private apartment in the house of* SULPICIUS.

Enter SULPICIUS *and* ORCERES *by opposite sides.*

SULPICIUS.

So soon returned! — I read not in thy face
Aught to encourage or depress my wishes.
How is it noble friend?

ORCERES.

Ev'n as it was e'er I received my mission.
Cordenius Maro is on public duty;
I have not seen him.—When he knows your offer
His heart will bound with joy, like eaglet plum'd
Whose out-stretch'd pinions wheeling round and round,
Shape their first circles in the sunny air.

SULPICIUS.

And with good cause.

ORCERES.

Methinks I see him now!
A face with blushes mantling to the brow,
Eyes with bright tears surcharged, and parted lips
Quiv'ring to utter joy which hath no words.

SULPICIUS.

His face, indeed, as I have heard thee say,
Is like a wave which sun and shadow cross;
Each thought makes there its momentary mark.

ORCERES.

And then his towering form, and vaulting step,
As tenderness gives way to exultation!
O it had been a feast to look upon him;
And still shall be.

SULPICIUS.

Art thou so well convinced —
He loves my little damsel? — She is fair,
But seems to me too simple, gay, and thoughtless,
For noble Maro. Heiress as she is
To all my wealth, had I suspected sooner,
That he had smother'd wishes in his breast
As too presumptuous, or that she in secret
Preferr'd his silent homage to the praise
Of any other man, I had most frankly
Removed all hindrance to so fair a suit.
For, in these changeling and degenerate days,
I scarcely know a man of nobler worth.

ORCERES.

Thou scarcely know'st! Say certainly thou dost not.
He is, to honest right, as simply true
As shepherd child on desert pasture bred,
Where falsehood and deceit have never been;
And to maintain them, ardent, skilful, potent,
As the shrewd leader of unruly tribes.
A simple heart and subtle spirit join'd,

Make such an union as in Nero's court,
May pass for curious and unnatural.

SULPICIUS.

But is the public duty very urgent
That so untowardly delays our happiness?

ORCERES.

The punishment of those poor Nazarenes,
Who, in defiance of imperial power,
To their forbidden faith and rites adhere
With obstinacy most astonishing.

SULPICIUS.

A stubborn contumacy unaccountable!

ORCERES.

There's sorcery in it, or some stronger power.
But be it what it may, or good or ill,
They look on death in its most dreadful form,
As martial heroes on a wreath of triumph.
The fires are kindled in the place of death,
And bells toll dismally. The life of Rome
In one vast clust'ring mass hangs round the spot,
And no one to his neighbour utters word,
But in an alter'd voice; with breath restrain'd,
Like those who speak at midnight near the dead.
Cordenius heads the band that guards the pile;
So station'd, who could speak to him of pleasure?
For it would seem as an ill-omen'd thing.

SULPICIUS.

Cease; here comes Portia, with a careless face:
She knows not yet the happiness that waits her.

ORCERES.

Who brings she with her thus, as if compell'd
By playful force?

SULPICIUS.

'Tis her Numidian Page; a cunning imp,
Who must be wooed to do the thing he's proud of.

Enter PORTIA, *dragging* SYPHAX *after her, speaking as she enters.*

PORTIA.

Come in, deceitful thing!—I know thee well;
With all thy sly affected bashfulness,
Thou'rt bold enough to sing in Cesar's court,
With the whole senate present. [*to* ORC.
Prince of Parthia,
I knew not you were here; but yet I guess
The song which this sly creature sings so well,
Will please you also.

ORCERES.

How can it fail, fair Portia, so commended?

SULPICIUS.

What is this boasted lay?

PORTIA.

That tune, my father,
Which you so oft have tried to recollect;
But linked with other words, of new device,
That please my fancy well. — Come, sing it, boy!

SULPICIUS.

Nay, sing it Syphax, be not so abash'd,
If thou art really so. — Begin, begin!

But speak thy words distinctly as thou sing'st,
That I may have their meaning perfectly.

SONG.

The storm is gath'ring far and wide,
Yon mortal hero must abide.
Power on earth, and power in air,
Falchion's gleam and lightning's glare;
Arrows hurtling thro' the blast;
Stones from flaming meteor cast:
Floods from burthen'd skies are pouring,
O'er mingled strife of battle roaring;
Nature's rage and Demon's ire,
Belt him round with turmoil dire:
Noble hero! earthly wight!
Brace thee bravely for the fight.

And so, indeed, thou tak'st thy stand,
Shield on arm and glaive in hand;
Breast encased in burnish'd steel,
Helm on head, and pike on heel;
And, more than meets the outward eye,
The soul's high-temper'd panoply,
Which every limb for action lightens,
The form dilates, the visage brightens:
Thus art thou, lofty, mortal wight!
Full nobly harness'd for the fight.

ORCERES.

The picture of some very noble hero
These lines pourtray.

SULPICIUS.

So it should seem; one of the days of old.

PORTIA.

And why of olden days? There liveth now
The very man — a man — I mean to say,
There may be found amongst our Roman youth,
One, who in form and feelings may compare
With him whose lofty virtues these few lines
So well describe.

ORCERES.

Thou mean'st the lofty Gorbus.

PORTIA.

Out on the noisy braggart! Arms without
He hath, indeed, well burnish'd and well plumed,
But the poor soul, within, is pluck'd and bare,
Like any homely thing.

ORCERES.

Sertorius Galba then?

PORTIA.

O, stranger still!
For if he hath no lack of courage, certes,
He hath much lack of grace. Sertorius Galba!

ORCERES.

Perhaps thou mean'st Cordenius Maro, lady.
Thy cheeks grow scarlet at the very name,
Indignant that I still should err so strangely.

PORTIA.

No, not indignant, for thou errest not;
Nor do I blush, albeit thou think'st I do,
To say, there is not of our Romans one,

Whose martial form a truer image gives
Of firm heroic courage.

SULPICIUS.

Cease, sweet Portia;
He only laughs at thy simplicity.

ORCERES.

Simplicity seen through a harmless wile,
Like to the infant urchin, half concealed
Behind his smiling dam's transparent veil.
The song is not a stranger to mine ear,
Methinks I've heard it, passing thro' those wilds,
Whose groves and caves, if rumour speak the truth,
Are by the Nazarenes or Christians haunted.

SULPICIUS.

Let it no more be sung within my walls:
A chaunt of their's to bring on pestilence!
Sing it no more. What sounds are those I hear?

ORCERES.

The dismal death-drum and the crowd without.
They are this instant leading past your door
Those wretched Christians to their dreadful doom.

SULPICIUS.

We'll go and see them pass.

[*Exeunt hastily*, SULPICIUS, ORCERES.

PORTIA. *(Stopping her ears.)*

I cannot look on them, nor hear the sound.
I'll to my chamber.

PAGE.

May not I, I pray,
Look on them as they pass?

PORTIA.

No; go not, child:
'Twill frighten thee; it is a horrid sight.

PAGE.

Yet, an it please you, lady, let me go.

PORTIA.

I say it is a horrid, piteous sight,
Thou wilt be frighten'd at it.

PAGE.

Nay, be it e'er so piteous or so horrid,
I have a longing, strong desire to see it.

PORTIA.

Go then; there is in this no affectation:
There's all the harden'd cruelty of man
Lodged in that tiny form, child as thou art.

[*Exeunt, severally.*

SCENE II.

An Open Square, with Buildings.

Enter CORDENIUS MARO, *at the head of his Soldiers, who draw up on either Side: then enters a long procession of public Functionaries, &c. conducting Martyrs to the place of Execution, who, as they pass on, sing together in unison: one more noble than the others, walking first.*

SONG.

A long farewell to sin and sorrow,
To beam of day and evening shade!
High in glory breaks our morrow,
With light that cannot fade.

While mortal flesh in flame is bleeding,
For humble penitence and love,
Our Brother and our Lord is pleading
At mercy's throne above.

We leave the hated and the hating,
Existence sad in toil and strife;
The great, the good, the brave are waiting
To hail our opening life.

Earth's faded sounds our ears forsaking,
A moment's silence death shall be;
Then, to heaven's jubilee awaking,
Faith ends in victory.

[*Exeunt Martyrs, &c. &c.* CORDENIUS *with his Officers and Soldiers still remaining; the Officers on the front, and* CORDENIUS *apart from them in a thoughtful posture.*

FIRST OFFICER.

Brave Varus marches boldly at the head
Of that deluded band.

SECOND OFFICER.

Are these the men, Who hateful orgies hold
In dens and deserts, courting, with enchantments,
The intercourse of demons?

THIRD OFFICER.

Aye, With rites
Cruel and wild. To crucify a babe,
And, while it yet hangs shrieking on the rood,
Fall down and worship it! device abominable!

FIRST OFFICER.

Dost thou believe it?

THIRD OFFICER.

I can believe or this or any thing
Of the possess'd and mad.

FIRST OFFICER.

What demonry, thinkest thou, possesses Varus?

SECOND OFFICER.

That is well urged. (*to the other.*) Is he a maniac?
Alas, that I should see so brave a soldier
Thus, as a malefactor, led to death!

FIRST OFFICER.

Viewing his keen enliven'd countenance
And stately step, one should have rather guess'd
He led victorious soldiers to the charge:
And they, indeed, appeared to follow him
With noble confidence.

THIRD OFFICER.

'Tis all vain seeming.
He is a man, who makes a show of valour
To which his deeds have born slight testimony.

CORDENIUS, (*advancing indignantly.*)

Thou liest; a better and a braver soldier
Ne'er fronted foe, or closed in bloody strife.
[*Turning away angrily to the back ground.*

FIRST OFFICER.

Our chief, methinks, is in a fretful mood,
Which is not usual with him.

SECOND OFFICER.

He did not seem to listen to our words.
But see, he gives the signal to proceed;

We must advance, and with our closing ranks
The fatal pile encircle.

[*Exeunt in order, whilst a chorus of Martyrs is heard at a distance.*

SCENE III.

An Apartment in a Private House.

Enter two Christian Women, *by opposite sides.*

FIRST WOMAN.

Hast thou heard any thing?

SECOND WOMAN.

Nought, save the murmur of the multitude,
Sinking at times to deep and awful silence,
From which again a sudden burst will rise
Like mingled exclamations, as of horror
Or admiration. In these neighbouring streets
I have not met a single citizen,
The town appearing uninhabited.
But wherefore art thou here? Thou should'st have stayed
With the unhappy mother of poor Cælus.

FIRST WOMAN.

She sent me hither in her agony
Of fear and fearful hope.

SECOND WOMAN.

Ha! does she hope deliverance from death?

FIRST WOMAN.

O no! thou wrong'st her, friend; it is not that:
Deliverance is her fear, and death her hope.

A second time she bears a mother's throes
For her young stripling, whose exalted birth
To endless life is at this fearful crisis,
Or earned or lost. May heaven forfend the last!
He is a timid youth, and soft of nature:
God grant him strength to bear that fearful proof!

SECOND WOMAN.

Here comes our reverend father.

Enter a CHRISTIAN FATHER.

What tidings dost thou bring? are they in bliss?

FATHER.

Yes, daughter, as I trust, they are ere this
In high immortal bliss. Cælus alone —

FIRST WOMAN.

He hath apostatized! O woe is me!
O woe is me for his most wretched mother!

FATHER.

Apostatized! No; stripling as he is,
His fortitude, where all were braced and brave,
Shone paramount.
For his soft downy cheek and slender form
Made them conceive they might subdue his firmness,
Therefore he was reserved till noble Varus
And his compeers had in the flames expired.
Then did they court and tempt him with fair promise

Of all that earthly pleasure or ambition
Can offer, to deny his holy faith.
But he, who seem'd before so meek and timid,
Now suddenly embued with holy grace,
Like the transition of some watery cloud
In passing o'er the moon's refulgent disc,
Glowed with new life; and from his fervid tongue
Words of most firm indignant constancy
Pour'd eloquently forth; then to the pile
Sprung lightly up, like an undaunted warrior
Scaling the breach of honour; or, alas!
As I have seen him midst his boyish mates,
Vaulting aloft for every love of motion.

FIRST WOMAN.

High heaven be prais'd for this! — Thine eyes beheld it?

FATHER.

I saw it not: the friend who witness'd it,
Left him yet living midst devouring flame,
Therefore I spoke of Cælus doubtfully,
If he as yet belong'd to earth or heaven.

[*They cover their faces, and remain silent.*

Enter a CHRISTIAN BROTHER.

BROTHER.

Lift up your heads, my sisters! let your voices
In grateful thanks be rais'd! Those ye lament,
Have earthly pangs for heavenly joy exchanged.
The manly Varus and the youthful Cælus,

The lion and the dove, yoke-fellows link'd,
Have equal bliss and equal honour gain'd.

FIRST WOMAN.

And prais'd be God, who makes the weakest strong!
I'll to his mother with the blessed tidings.
[*Exit.*

FATHER.

Let us retire and pray. How soon our lives
May have like ending, God alone doth know!
O! may like grace support us in our need!
[*Exeunt.*

SCENE IV.

An Open Space in front of a Temple.

Enter CORDENIUS, *as returned from the Execution with his Soldiers, who, upon a signal from him, disperse and leave him alone. He walks a few paces slowly, then stops and continues for a short time in a thoughtful posture.*

CORDENIUS.

There is some power in this, or good or ill,
Surpassing nature. When the soul is roused
To desp'rate sacrifice, 'tis ardent passion,
Or high exalted virtue that excites it.
Can loathsome demonry in dauntless bearing,
Outdo the motives of the lofty brave?
It cannot be! There is some power in this

Mocking all thought — incomprehensible.
[*Remains for a moment silent and thoughtful, while* Sylvius *enters behind him unperceived.*
Delusion! ay, 'tis said the cheated sight
Will see unreal things; the cheated ear
List to sweet sounds that are not; even the reason
Maintain conclusions wild and inconsistent.
We hear of this: — the weak may be deluded;
But is the learn'd, th' enlighten'd, noble Varus
The victim of delusion? — Can it be?
I'll not believe it.

SYLVIUS (*advancing to him*).

No, believe it not.

CORDENIUS (*starting*).

Ha! one so near me!
I have seen thy face before; but where? — who art thou?

SYLVIUS.

Ev'n that Centurion of the Seventh Legion,
Who, with Cordenius Maro, at the siege
Of Fort *Volundum* *, mounted first the breach;
And kept the clust'ring enemy in check,
Till our encouraged Romans followed us.

CORDENIUS.

My old companion then, the valiant Sylvius.

* A strong fort in Armenia, taken by Corbulo in Nero's reign.

Thou'st done hard service since I saw thee last:
Thy countenance is mark'd with graver lines
Than in those greener days: I knew thee not.
Where goest thou now? I'll bear thee company.

SYLVIUS.

I thank thee: yet thou may'st not go with me.
The way that I am wending suits not thee,
Tho' suiting well the noble and the brave.
It were not well, in fiery times like these,
To tempt thy generous mind.

CORDENIUS.

What dost thou mean?

SYLVIUS (*after looking cautiously round to see that nobody is near*).

Did I not hear thee commune with thyself
Of that most blessed Martyr gone to rest,
Varus Dobella?

CORDENIUS.

How blessed? My unsettled thoughts were busy
With things mysterious; with those magic powers
That work the mind to darkness and destruction;
With the sad end of the *deluded* Varus.

SYLVIUS.

Not so, no so! The wisest prince on earth,
With treasured wealth and armies at command,

Ne'er earn'd withal such lofty exaltation
As Varus now enjoys.

CORDENIUS.

Thy words amaze me, friend; what is their meaning?

SYLVIUS.

They cannot be explain'd with hasty speech
In such a place. If thou would'st really know —
And may such light ——

CORDENIUS.

Why dost thou check thy words,
And look so much disturb'd, like one in doubt?

SYLVIUS.

What am I doing! Zeal, perhaps, betrays me.
Yet, wherefore hide salvation from a man
Who is so worthy of it?

CORDENIUS.

Why art thou agitated thus? What moves thee?

SYLVIUS.

And would'st thou really know it?

CORDENIUS.

Dost thou doubt me?
I have an earnest, most intense desire.

SYLVIUS.

Sent to thy heart, brave Roman, by a Power

Which I may not resist. [*Bowing his head.*
But go not with me now in open day.
At fall of eve, I'll meet thee in the suburb,
Close to the pleasure-garden of Sulpitius;
Where in a bushy crevice of the rock
There is an entry to the catacombs,
Known but to few.

CORDENIUS.

Ha! to the catacombs!

SYLVIUS.

A dismal place, I own, but heed not that;
For there thou'lt learn what, to thy ardent mind,
Will make this world but as a thorny pass
To regions of delight; man's natural life
With all its varied turmoil of ambition,
But as the training of a wayward child
To manly excellence; yea, death itself
But as a painful birth to life unending.
The word eternal has not to thine ears,
As yet, its awful, ample sense conveyed.

CORDENIUS.

Something possesses thee.

SYLVIUS.

Yes, noble Maro;
But it is something which can ne'er possess
A mind that is not virtuous. — Let us part;
It is expedient now. — All good be with thee!

CORDENIUS.

And good be with thee, also, valiant soldier!

SYLVIUS (*returning as he is about to go out*).

At close of day, and near the pleasure-garden,—
The garden of Sulpitius.

CORDENIUS.

I know the spot, and will not fail to meet thee.

[*Exeunt.*

ACT II.

SCENE. — *The Catacombs, showing long low-roofed aisles, in different directions, supported by thick pillars of the rough unhewn rock, with rude tombs and heaps of human bones, and the walls in many places lined with human skulls.*

Enter CORDENIUS MARO, *speaking to a* CHRISTIAN FATHER, *on whose arm he leans, and followed by* SYLVIUS.

CORDENIUS.

One day and two bless'd nights, spent in acquiring
Your heavenly lore, so powerful and sublime, —
Oh! what an altered creature they have made me!

FATHER.

Yes, gentle son, I trust that thou art altered.

CORDENIUS.

I am, methinks, like one, who, with bent back
And downward gaze — if such a one might be —
Hath only known the boundless azure sky
By the strait circle of reflected beauty,
Seen in the watery gleam of some deep pit,
Till of a sudden roused, he stands erect,
And wondering looks aloft and all around
On the bright sunny firmament: — like one
(Granting again that such a one might be)

Who hath but seen the element of fire
On household hearth or woodman's smoky pile,
And looks at once, midst stounding thunder-peals,
On Jove's magnificence of lightning. — Pardon,
I pray you pardon me! I mean *his* lightning,
Who is the Jove of Jove, the great Jehova.

FATHER (*smiling*).

Be not disturb'd, my son; the lips will utter,
From lengthen'd habit, what the mind rejects.

CORDENIUS.

These blessed hours which I have pass'd with you
Have to my intellectual being given
New feelings and expansion, like to that
Which once I felt, on viewing by degrees
The wide developement of nature's amplitude.

FATHER.

And how was that, my son?

CORDENIUS.

I well remember it; even at this moment
Imagination sees it all again.
'Twas on a lofty mountain of Armenia,
O'er which I led by night my martial cohort,
To shun the fierce heat of a summer's day.
Close round us hung, the vapours of the night
Had form'd woofy curtain, dim and pale,
Through which the waning moon did faintly mark
Its slender crescent.

FATHER.

Ay, the waned moon thro' midnight vapours seen,
Fit emblem is of that retrenching light,
Dubious and dim, which to the earliest Patriarchs
Was at the first vouchsafed; a moral guide,
Soon clouded and obscured to their descendants,
Who peopled far and wide, in scattered tribes,
The fertile earth. — But this is interruption.
Proceed, my son.

CORDENIUS.

Well, on the lofty summit
We halted, and the day's returning light
On this exalted station found us. Then
Our brighten'd curtain, wearing into shreds
And rifted masses, through its opening gave
Glimpse after glimpse of slow revealed beauty,
Which held th' arrested senses magic bound,
In the intensity of charm'd attention.

FATHER.

From such an eminence, the op'ning mist
Would to the eye reveal most beauteous visions.

CORDENIUS.

First, far beneath us, woody peaks appear'd,
And knolls with cedars crested; then, beyond,
And lower still, the herdsmen's cluster'd dwellings,

With pasture slopes, and flocks just visible;
Then, further still, soft wavy wastes of forest,
In all the varied tints of sylvan verdure,
Descending to the plain; then wide and boundless
The plain itself, with towns and cultured tracts,
And its fair river gleaming in the light,
With all its sweepy windings, seen and lost,
And seen again, till thro' the pale grey tint
Of distant space, it seem'd a loosen'd cestus
From virgin's tunic blown; and still beyond,
The earth's extended vastness from the sight
Wore like the boundless ocean.
My heart beat rapidly at the fair sight—
This ample earth, man's natural habitation.
But now, when to my mental eye reveal'd,
His moral destiny, so grand and noble,
Lies stretching on even to immensity,
It overwhelms me with a flood of thoughts,
Of happy thoughts.

FATHER.

Thanks be to God that thou dost feel it so!

CORDENIUS.

I am most thankful for the words of power
Which from thy gifted lips and sacred scripture
I have received. What feelings they have raised!
O what a range of thought given to the mind!
And to the soul what loftiness of hope!
That future dreamy state of faint existence
Which poets have described and sages taught,

In which the brave and virtuous pined and droop'd
In useless indolence, changed for a state
Of social love, and joy, and active bliss,—
A state of brotherhood, — a state of virtue,
So grand, so purified; — O it is excellent!
My soul is roused within me at the sound,
Like some poor slave, who from a dungeon issues
To range with free-born men his native land.

FATHER.

Thou may'st, indeed, my son, redeem'd from thraldom,
Become the high compeer of blessed spirits.

CORDENIUS.

The high compeer of such! — These gushing tears,
Nature's mysterious tears, will have their way.

FATHER.

To give thy heart relief.

CORDENIUS.

And yet mysterious. Why do we weep
At contemplation of exalted virtue?
Perhaps in token of the fallen state
In which we are, as thrilling sympathy
Strangely acknowledges some sight and sound,
Connected with a dear and distant home,
Albeit the mem'ry hath that link forgotten: —
A kind of latent sense of what we were
Or might have been; a deep mysterious token.

FATHER.

Perhaps thou'rt right, my son; for even the wicked
Will sometimes weep at lofty, generous deeds.
Some broken traces of our noble nature
Were yet preserved; therefore our great Creator
Still loved his work, and thought it worth redemption.
And therefore his bless'd Son, our generous Master,
Did, as the elder brother of that race,
Whose form he took, lay down his life to save us.
But I have read thee, in our sacred book,
His gentle words of love.

CORDENIUS.

Thou hast! thou hast! they're stirring in my heart:
Each fibre of my body thrills in answer
To the high call.—

FATHER.

The Spirit of Power, my son, is dealing with thee.

CORDENIUS (*after a pause*).

One thing amazes me, yet it is excellent.

FATHER.

And what amazes thee? Unbosom freely
What passes in thy mind.

CORDENIUS.

That this religion which dilates our thoughts
Of God Supreme to an infinity

Of awful greatness, yet connects us with him,
As children, loved and cherish'd ; —
Adoring awe with tenderness united.

SYLVIUS (*eagerly*).

Ay, brave Cordenius, that same thought more moved
My rude unletter'd mind than all the rest.
I struck my hand against my soldier's mail,
And cried, "This faith is worthy of a man!"

CORDENIUS.

Our best philosophers have raised their thoughts
To one great universal Lord of all,
Lord even of Jove himself and all the gods ;
But who durst feel for that high, distant Essence
A warmer sentiment than deep submission?
But now, adoring love and grateful confidence
Cling to th' infinity of power and goodness,
As the repentant child turns to his sire
With yearning looks that say, "Am I not thine?"
I am too bold : I should be humbled first
In penitence and sorrow, for the stains
Of many a hateful vice and secret passion.

FATHER.

Check not the generous tenour of thy thoughts :
O check it not! Love leads to penitence,
And is the noblest, surest path ; whilst fear
Is dark and devious. To thy home return,
And let thy mind well weigh what thou hast heard.

If then thou feel'st within thee faith assured;
That faith, which may, ev'n through devouring
flames,
Its passage hold to heaven, baptismal rites
Shall give thee entrance to a purer life,
Receive thee, as thy Saviour's valiant soldier,
For his high warfare arm'd.

CORDENIUS.

I am resolved, and feel that in my heart
There lives that faith; baptize me ere we part.

FATHER.

So be it then. But yet that holy rite
Must be deferr'd; for lo! our brethren come,
Bearing the ashes of our honour'd saints,
Which must, with hymns of honour, be received.

Enter CHRISTIANS, *seen advancing slowly along one of the aisles, and bearing a large veiled urn, which they set down near the front. They then lift off the veil and range themselves round it, while one sings and the rest join in the Chorus at the end of each short verse.*

SONG.

Departed brothers, generous, brave,
Who for the faith have died,
Nor its pure source denied,
Your bodies from devouring flames to save,

CHORUS.

Honour on earth, and bliss in heaven,
Be to your saintly valour given!

And we, who, left behind, pursue
A pilgrim's weary way
To realms of glorious day,
Shall rouse our fainting souls with thoughts of you.
Honour on earth, &c.

Your ashes, mingled with the dust,
Shall yet be forms more fair
Than e'er breathed vital air,
When earth again gives up her precious trust.
Honour on earth, &c.

The trump of angels shall proclaim,
With tones far sent and sweet,
Which countless hosts repeat,
The generous martyr's never-fading name.
Honour on earth, and bliss in heaven,
Be to your saintly valour given!

CORDENIUS (*to Father*).

And ye believe those, who a few hours since
Were clothed in flesh and blood, and here, before us,
Lie thus, ev'n to a few dry ashes changed,
Are now exalted spirits, holding life
With blessed powers, and agencies, and all

Who have on earth a virtuous part fulfill'd?
The dear redeem'd of Godlike love, again
To their primeval destiny restored?
It is a generous, powerful, noble faith.

SYLVIUS.

Did I not tell thee, as we pass'd along,
It well became a Roman and a soldier?

FATHER.

Nay, worthy Sylvius, somewhat more of meekness
And less of martial ardour were becoming
In those, whose humble Lord stretch'd forth his hand,
His saving hand, to ev'n the meanest slave
Who bends beneath an earthly master's rod.
This faith is meet for all of human kind.

CORDENIUS.

Forgive him, father: see, he stands reproved;
His heart is meek, tho' ardent;
It is, indeed, a faith for all mankind.

FATHER.

We feel it such, my son, press'd as we are;
On every side beset with threatening terrours.
Look on these ghastly walls, these shapeless pillars,
These heaps of human bones, — this court of death;
Ev'n here, as in a temple, we adore

The Lord of life, and sing our song of hope,
That death has lost his sting, the grave his triumph.

CORDENIUS.

O make me then the partner of your hopes!

[*Taking the hand of* SYLVIUS, *and then of several other* CHRISTIANS.

Brave men! high destined souls! immortal beings!
The blessed faith and sense of what we are
Comes on my heart, like streams of beamy light
Pour'd from some opening cloud. O to conceive
What lies beyond the dim, dividing veil,
Of regions bright, of blest and glorious being!

FATHER.

Ay, when it is withdrawn, we shall behold
What heart hath ne'er conceived, nor tongue could utter.

CORDENIUS.

When but a boy, I've gazed upon the sky,
With all its sparks of light, as a grand cope
For the benighted world. But now my fancy
Will greet each twinkling star, as the bright lamp
Of some fair angel on his guardian watch.
And think ye not, that from their lofty stations
Our future glorious home, our Father's house,
May lie within the vast and boundless ken
Of such seraphic powers?

FATHER.

Thy fancy soars on wide and buoyant wings;
Speak on, my son, I would not check thy ardour.

CORDENIUS.

This solid earth is press'd beneath our feet,
But as a step from which to take our flight;
What boots it then, if rough or smooth it be,
Serving its end? — Come, noble Sylvius!
We've been companions in the broil of battle,
Now be we fellow-soldiers in that warfare
Which best becomes the brave.

SYLVIUS.

Cordenius Maro, we shall be companions
When this wide earth with all its fields of blood
Where war hath raged, and all its towers of strength
Which have begirded been with iron hosts,
Are shrunk to nothing, and the flaming sun
Is in his course extinguish'd.

CORDENIUS.

Come, lead me, father, to the holy fount,
If I in humble penitence may be
From worldly vileness clear'd.

FATHER.

I gladly will, my son. The spirit of grace
Is dealing with thy spirit: be received,
A ransom'd penitent, to the high fellowship
Of all the good and bless'd in earth and heaven!

Enter a CONVERT.

Whence comest thou, Fearon? Why wert thou prevented
From joining in our last respectful homage
To those, who have so nobly for the truth
Laid down their lives?

CONVERT.

I have been watching near the grated dungeon
Where Ethocles, the Grecian, is immured.

FATHER.

Thou say'st not so! A heavier loss than this,
If they have seiz'd on him, the righteous cause
Could not have suffer'd. Art thou sure of it?
We had not heard of his return from Syria.

CONVERT.

It is too true: he landed ten days since
On the Brundusian coast, and as he enter'd
The gates of Rome, was seized and dragg'd to prison.

FATHER.

And we in utter ignorance of this!

CONVERT.

He travell'd late and unaccompanied,
So this was done at night-fall and conceal'd.
But see his writing, given me by a guard,
Who has for pity's sake betray'd his trust:
It is address'd to thee. [*Giving him a paper.*

FATHER (*after reading it*).

Alas, alas! it is a brief account
Of his successful labours in the East:
For with his excellent gifts of eloquence,
Learning, and prudence, he has made more converts
Than all our zealous brotherhood besides.
What can we do? He will be sacrificed:
The church in him must bleed, if God so wills.
It is a dreadful blow.

CORDENIUS (*to the* CONVERT).

I pray thee, in what prison is he kept?

CONVERT.

In Sylla's tower, that dwelling of despair.

CORDENIUS.

Guarded by Romans?

CONVERT.

Yes; and strongly guarded.

CORDENIUS.

Yet, he shall be released.

FATHER (*to* CORDENIUS).

Beware, my son, of rash, imprudent zeal:
The truth hath suffer'd much from this; beware:
Risk not thyself: thy life is also precious.

CORDENIUS.

My whole of life is precious; but this shred,
This earthly portion of it, what is that,
But as it is employ'd in holy acts?
Am I Christ's soldier at a poorer rate
Than I have served an earthly master? No;
I feel within my glowing breast a power
Which says I am commission'd for this service.
Give me thy blessing — thy baptismal blessing,
And then God's spirit guide me! Serving God,
I will not count the cost but to discharge it.

FATHER.

His will direct thee then, my gen'rous son!
His blessing be upon thee! — Lead him, Sylvius,
To the blest fount, where from his former sins
He shall by heavenly grace be purified.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE II.

The Garden of Sulpicius.

Enter SULPICIUS, *and* PORTIA, *with flowers in her hand.*

PORTIA.

Was it not well to rise with early morn
And pay my homage to sweet Flora? Never
Were flowers by mid-day cull'd so fair, so fragrant,
With blending streaky tints, so fresh and bright.

See; twinkling dew-drops lurk in every bell,
And on the fibred leaves stray far apart,
Like little rounded gems of silver sheen,
Whilst curling tendrils grasp with vigorous hold
The stem that bears them! All looks young and fresh.
The very spider thro' his circled cage
Of wiry woof, amongst the buds suspended,
Scarce seems a lothly thing, but like the small
Imprison'd bird of some capricious nymph.
Is it not so, my father?

SULPICIUS.

Yes, morn and youth and freshness sweetly join,
And are the emblems of dear changeful days.
By night those beauteous things —

PORTIA.

And what of night?
Why do you check your words? You are not sad?

SULPICIUS.

No, Portia; only angry with myself
For crossing thy gay stream of youthful thoughts
With those of sullen age. Away with them!
What if those bright-leaved flowers, so soft and silken,
Are gathered into dank and wrinkled folds
When evening chills them, or upon the earth
With broken stems and buds torn and dispers'd,
Lie prostrate, of fair form and fragrance reft
When midnight winds pass o'er them; be it so!

All things but have their term.
In truth, my child, I am glad that I indulged thee
By coming forth at such an early hour
To pay thy worship to so sweet a goddess,
Upon her yearly feast.

PORTIA.

I thank you, father! On her feast, 'tis said,
That she, from mortal eye conceal'd, vouchsafes
Her presence in such sweet and flowery spots :
And where due offerings on her shrine are laid,
Blesses all seeds and shoots, and things of promise.

SULPICIUS.

How many places in one little day
She needs must visit then!

PORTIA.

But she moves swift as thought. The hasty zephyr,
That stirr'd each slender leaf, now as we enter'd,
And made a sudden sound, by stillness follow'd,
Might be the rustling of her passing robe.

SULPICIUS.

A pleasing fancy, Portia, for the moment,
Yet wild as pleasing.

PORTIA.

Wherefore call it wild?
Full many a time I've listen'd when alone

In such fair spots as this, and thought I heard
Sweet mingled voices uttering varied tones
Of question and reply, pass on the wind,
And heard soft steps upon the ground; and then
The notion of bright Venus or Diana,
Or goddess-nymphs, would come so vividly
Into my mind, that I am almost certain
Their radiant forms were near me, tho' conceal'd
By subtle drapery of the ambient air.
And oh, how I have long'd to look upon them!
An ardent strange desire, tho' mix'd with fear.
Nay, do not smile, my father: such fair sights
Were seen — were often seen in ancient days;
The poets tell us so.
But look, the Indian roses I have foster'd
Are in full bloom; and I must gather them.

[*Exit, eagerly.*

SULPICIUS (*alone*).

Go, gentle creature, thou art careless yet:
Ah! couldst thou so remain, and still with me
Be as in years gone by! — It may not be;
Nor should I wish it: all things have their season:
She may not now remain an old man's treasure,
With all her woman's beauty grown to blossom.

Enter ORCERES.

The Parthian prince at such an early hour?

ORCERES.

And who considers hours, whose heart is bent
On what concerns a lover and a friend?
Where is thy daughter?

SULPICIUS.

Within yon flowery thicket, blythe and careless;
For tho' she loves, 'tis with sweet, maiden fancy,
Which, not impatient, looks in cheering hope
To future years.

ORCERES.

Ay, 'tis a sheltered passion,
A cradled love, by admiration foster'd:
A showy, toward nurse for babe so bashful.
Thus in the shell athwart whose snowy lining
Each changeful tint of the bright rainbow plays,
A little pearl is found, in secret value
Surpassing all the rest.

SULPICIUS.

But sayest thou nothing
Of what I wish to hear? What of Cordenius?

ORCERES.

By my good war-bow and its barbed shafts!
By the best war-horse archer e'er bestrode!
I'm still in ignorance; I have not seen him.

SULPICIUS.

Thou hast not seen him! this is very strange.

ORCERES.

So it indeed appears. — My wayward friend
Has from his home been absent. Yesterday,
There and elsewhere I sought, but found him not.
This morning by the dawn again I sought him,
Thinking to find him surely and alone;
But his domestics, much amazed, have told me,
He is not yet return'd.

SULPICIUS.

Hush! thro' yon thicket I perceive a man.

ORCERES.

Some thief or spy.

SULPICIUS.

Let us withdraw awhile,
And mark his motions; he observes us not.

Enter CORDENIUS *from a Thicket in the back Ground.*

CORDENIUS (*after looking round him with delight*).

Sweet light of day, fair sky, and verdant earth,
Enrich'd with every beauteous herb and flower,
And stately trees, that spread their boughs like tents
For shade and shelter, how I hail ye now!
Ye are his works, who made such fair abodes
For happy innocence, yet, in the wreck
Of foul perversion, has not cast us off.
[*Stooping to look at the flowers.*

Ye little painted things, whose varied hues
Charm, ev'n to wonderment; that mighty hand
Which dyes the mountain's peak with rosy tints
Sent from the rising sun, and to the barbed
Destructive lightning gives its ruddy gleam,
Grand and terrific, thus adorns even you!
There is a father's full unstinted love
Display'd o'er all, and thus on all I gaze
With the keen thrill of new-waked exstacy.
What voice is that so near me and so sweet?

PORTIA *without, singing some notes of prelude, and then a Song.*

SONG.

The lady in her early bower
Is blest as bee in morning flower;
The lady's eye is flashing bright,
Like water in the morning light;
The lady's song is sweet and loud,
Like skylark o'er the morning cloud;
The lady's smiles are smiles that pass
Like morning's breath o'er wavy grass.

She thinks of one, whose harness'd car
In triumph comes from distant war;
She thinks of one, whose martial state
Will darken Rome's imperial gate;
She thinks of one, with laurel crown'd,
Who shall with sweeter wreaths be bound.
Voice, eye, and smiles, in mingled play,
The lady's happy thoughts betray.

CORDENIUS.

Her voice indeed, and this my fav'rite song!
It is that gentle creature, my sweet Portia.
I call her mine, because she is the image
Which hath possess'd my fancy. Such vain thoughts
Must now give place. I will not linger here.
This is the garden of Sulpicius;
How have I miss'd my path? She sings again.

[*Sings without, as before.*

She wanders fitfully from lay to lay,
But all of them some air that I have prais'd
In happy hours gone by.

SONG.

The kind heart speaks with words so kindly sweet,
That kindred hearts the catching tones repeat;
And love, therewith his soft sigh gently blending,
Makes pleasing harmony. Thus softly sending
Its passing cheer across the stilly main,
Whilst in the sounding water dips the oar
And glad response bursts from the nearing shore,
Comes to our ears the home-bound seamen's strain,
Who from the lofty deck, hail their own land again.

CORDENIUS.

O gentle, sweet, and cheerful! form'd to be
Whate'er my heart could prize of treasured love!
Dear as thou art, I will not linger here.

Re-enter SULPICIUS *and* ORCERES, *breaking out upon him, and* ORCERES *catching hold of his robe as he is going off.*

ORCERES.

Ha! noble Maro, to a coward turn'd,
Shunning a spot of danger!

SULPICIUS.

Stay, Cordenius.
The fellest foe thou shalt contend with here,
Is her thou call'st so gentle. As for me,
I do not offer thee this hand more freely
Than I will grant all that may make thee happy,
If Portia has that power.

CORDENIUS.

And dost thou mean, in very earnest mean,
That thou wilt give me Portia — thy dear Portia?
My fancy catches wildly at thy words.

SULPICIUS.

And truly too, Cordenius. She is thine,
If thou wilt promise me to love her truly.

CORDENIUS.

(Eagerly clasping the knees, and then kissing the hands of SULPICIUS.)

Thanks, thanks! — thanks from my swoln, o'er-
flowing heart,
Which has no words. — Friend, father, Portia's
father!
The thought creates in me such sudden joy
I am bewilder'd with it.

SULPICIUS.

Calm thy spirits. —
Thou should'st in meeter form have known it
sooner,
Had not the execution of those Christians —
(Pests of the earth, whom on one burning pile,
With all their kind, I would most gladly punish,)
Till now prevented me. Thy friend, Orceres —
Thou owest him thanks — pled for thee power-
fully,
And had my leave. But dost thou listen to me?
Thy face wears many colours, and big drops
Burst from thy brow, whilst thy contracted lips
Quiver, like one in pain.

ORCERES.

What sudden illness racks thee?

CORDENIUS.

I may not tell you now: let me depart.

SULPICIUS (*holding him*).

Thou art my promised son; I have a right
To know whate'er concerns thee,—pain or pleasure.

CORDENIUS.

And so thou hast, and I may not deceive thee.
Take, take, Sulpicius.—O such with'ring words!
The sinking, sick'ning heart and parched mouth!
I cannot utter them.

SULPICIUS.

Why in this agony of perturbation?
Nay, strive not now to speak.

CORDENIUS.

I must, I must!—
Take back thy proffer'd gift; all earth could give;—
That which it cannot give I must retain.

SULPICIUS.

What words were these? If it were possible,
I could believe thee touch'd with sorcery,
The cursed art of those vile Nazarenes.
Where hast thou past the night? their haunts are near.

ORCERES.

Nay, nay; repress thine anger; noble Maro
May not be questioned thus.

SULPICIUS.

He may, and shall. And yet I will not urge him,
If he, with hand press'd on his breast, will say,
That he detests those hateful Nazarenes.

CORDENIUS.

No; tho' my life, and what is dearer far,
My Portia's love, depended on the words,
I would not, and I durst not utter them.

SULPICIUS.

I see it well: thou art ensnared and blinded
By their enchantments. Demoniac power
Will drag thee to thy ruin. Cast it off;
Defy it. Say thou wilt forbear all intercourse
With this detested sect. Art thou a madman?

CORDENIUS.

If I am mad, that which possesses me
Outvalues all philosophers e'er taught,
Or poets e'er imagined. — Listen to me.
Call ye these Christians vile, because they suffer
All nature shrinks from, rather than deny
What seems to them the truth? Call ye them sorcerers,
Because their words impart such high conceptions
Of power creative and parental love,
In one great Being join'd, as makes the heart
Bound with ennobling thoughts? Call ye them curst
Who daily live in steady strong assurance
Of endless blessedness? O, listen to me!

Re-enter PORTIA, *bursting from a Thicket close to them.*

PORTIA.

O, listen to him, father!

SULPICIUS.

Let go my robe, fond creature! Listen to him!
The song of syrens were less fatal. Charms
Of dire delusion, luring on to ruin,
Are mingled with the words that speak their faith;
They, who once hear them, flutter round destruction
With giddy fascination, like the moth,
Which, shorn of half its form, all scorch'd and shrivell'd,
Still to the torch returns. I will not listen;
No, Portia, nor shalt thou.

PORTIA.

O, say not so!
For if you listen to him, you may save him,
And win him from his errors.

SULPICIUS.

Vain hope! vain hope! What is man's natural reason
Opposed to demon subtlety? Cordenius!
Cordenius Maro! I adjure thee, go!
Leave me; why would'st thou pull destruction on me?
On one who loved thee so, that tho' possess'd

Of but one precious pearl, most dearly prized,
Prized more than life, yet would have given it to thee.
I needs must weep: ev'n for thyself I weep.

CORDENIUS.

Weep not, my kind Sulpicius! I will leave thee,
Albeit the pearl thou would'st bestow upon me
Is, in my estimation, dearer far
Than life, or power, or fame, or earthly thing.
When these fierce times are past, thou wilt, perhaps,
Think of me with regard, but not with pity,
How fell soe'er my earthly end hath been,
For I shall then be blest. And thou, dear Portia,
Wilt thou remember me? That thought, alas!
Dissolves my soul in weakness. —
O, to be spared, if it were possible,
This stroke of agony. Is it not possible,
That I might yet ——Almighty God forgive me!
Weak thoughts will lurk in the devoted heart,
But not be cherish'd there. I may not offer
Ought short of all to thee. ——
Farewell, farewell! sweet Portia, fare thee well!

[ORCERES *catches hold of him to prevent his going*

Retain me not: I am a Parthian now,
My strength is in retreat.

[*Exit.*

PORTIA.

That noble mind! and must it then be ruin'd?
O save him, save him, father! Brave Orceres,
Wilt thou not save thy friend, the noble Maro?

ORCERES.

We will, sweet maid, if it be possible.
We'll keep his faith a secret in our breasts;
And he may yet, if not by circumstances
Provok'd to speak, conceal it from the world.

PORTIA.

And you, my father?

SULPICIUS.

I will not betray him.

PORTIA.

Then all may yet be well; for our great gods,
Whom Cæsar and his subject-nations worship,
Will not abandon Rome's best, bravest soldier
To power demoniac. That can never be,
If they indeed regard us.

ORCERES.

Were he in Parthia, our great god, the sun,
Or rather he who in that star resides,
Would not permit his power to be so thwarted,
For all the demonry that e'er exerted
Its baleful influence on wretched men.
Beshrew me! for a thought gleams thro' my brain,
It is this God, perhaps, with some new name,
Which these bewilder'd Nazarenes adore.

SULPICIUS.

With impious rites, most strange and horrible.

ORCERES.

If he, my friend, in impious rites hath join'd,
Demons, indeed, have o'er the soul of man
A power to change its nature. Ay, Sulpicius;
And thou and I may, ere a day shall pass,
Be very Nazarenes. We are in ignorance;
We shoot our arrow in the dark, and cry,
"It is to wound a foe." Come, gentle Portia;
Be not so sad; the man thou lovest is virtuous,
And brave, and loves thee well; why then
despair?

PORTIA.

Alas! I know he is brave and virtuous,
Therefore, I do despair.

ORCERES.

In Nero's court, indeed,
Such men are ever on the brink of danger,
But would'st thou have him other than he is?

PORTIA.

O no! I would not; that were base and sordid;
Yet shed I tears, even like a wayward child
Who weeps for that which cannot be attain'd, —
Virtue, and constancy, and safety join'd.
I pray thee pardon me, for I am wretched,
And that doth make me foolish and perverse.

[*Exeunt.*

ACT III.

SCENE I. — *Before the Gate of* NERO*'s Palace: Guards with their Officers, discovered on Duty.*

Enter to them another Officer, *speaking as he enters to the Soldiers.*

FIRST OFFICER.

Strike up some sacred strain of Roman triumph;
The Pontiff comes to meet the summon'd council.
Omit not this respect, else he will deem
We are of those who love the Nazarenes.
Sing loud and clearly.

Enter PONTIFF *attended.*

SACRED HYMN *by the Soldiers.*

That chief, who bends to Jove the suppliant knee,
Shall firm in power and high in honour be;
And who to Mars a soldier's homage yields,
Shall laurell'd glory reap in bloody fields;
Who vine-crown'd Bacchus, bounteous Lord! adores,
Shall gather still, unskath'd, his vintage stores;

Who to fair Venus lib'ral off'ring gives,
Enrich'd with love, and sweet affection lives.
Then, be your praises still our sacred theme,
O Venus, Bacchus, Mars, and Jove supreme!

PONTIFF.

I thank ye, soldiers! Rome, indeed, hath triumph'd,
Bless'd in the high protection of her gods,
The sov'reign warrior-nation of the world;
And, favour'd by great Jove and mighty Mars,
So may she triumph still, nor meanly stoop
To worship strange and meaner deities,
Adverse to warlike glory.

[*Exit, with his train.*

FIRST OFFICER.

The Pontiff seems disturb'd, his brow is lowering.

SECOND OFFICER.

Reproof and caution, mingled with his thanks,
Tho' utter'd graciously.

FIRST OFFICER.

He is offended,
Because of late so many valiant soldiers
Have proselytes become to this new worship;
A worship too, as he insinuates,
Unsuited to the brave.

THIRD OFFICER.

Ay, ay! the sacred chickens are in danger.

SECOND OFFICER.

Sylvius is suspected, as I hear.

FIRST OFFICER.

Hush! let us to our duty; it is time
To change the inner guard.

[*Exeunt with music, into the gate of the palace.*

SCENE II.

A Council Chamber in the Palace, NERO *with his Counsellors discovered;* NERO *in the act of speaking.*

NERO.

Yes, Servius; formerly we have admitted,
As minor powers, amongst the ancient gods
Of high imperial Rome, the foreign deities
Of friendly nations; but these Nazarenes
Scorn such association, proudly claiming
For that which is the object of their faith,
Sole, undivided homage: and our altars,
Our stately temples, the majestic forms
Of Mars, Apollo, thund'ring Jove himself,
By sculptor's art divine, so nobly wrought,
Are held by these mad zealots in contempt.
Examine, sayest thou! shall imperial Cæsar
Deign to examine what withstands his power?
I marvel at thy folly, Servius Sillus.

Enter an Officer.

OFFICER.

The Pontiff, mighty Cæsar, waits without,
And craves admittance.

NERO.

Let him be admitted.

Enter PONTIFF.

Pontiff, thy visage, if I read it well,
Says, that some weighty matter brings thee here:
Thou hast our leave to speak.

PONTIFF.

Imperial Nero, did'st thou not condemn
That eloquent, but pestilential Nazaréne,
The Grecian Ethocles, whose specious words
Wrap in delusion all who listen to him,
Spreading his baleful errors o'er the world?

NERO.

Did I condemn him! Ev'en this very day,
He in the Amphitheatre meets his doom;
Having, I trust, no power of words to charm
The enchafed lion, or the famish'd wolf.

PONTIFF.

I am inform'd, and I believe it true,
That this bold malefactor is enlarged.

NERO.

It is impossible! Cordenius Maro
Is sworn to guard the prisoner; or, failing,
(How could he fail?) to pay with his own life
The forfeit. But behold his fav'rite friend,

Enter ORCERES, *followed by* SULPICIUS.

The Parthian Prince, who will inform us truly.
Orceres, is thy friend Cordenius coming?
I have commanded him, and at this hour,
To bring his guarded prisoner to the palace,
Here to remain till the appointed time.

ORCERES.

I know not; nor have I beheld Cordenius
Since yesterday; when, at an early hour,
Sulpicius and myself met him by chance:
But for the prisoner, he is at hand,
Ev'n at the palace gate; for as we enter'd
We saw him there, well circled round with guards,
Tho' in the martial throng we saw not Maro.

NERO.

[*To the* Pontiff.] Said I not so?
[*To an* Officer.] Command them instantly
To bring this wordy Grecian to our presence.
[*Exit* OFFICER.
Sulpicius, thou hast known this Ethocles,
Is he a madman or ambitious knave,

Who sought on human folly to erect
A kind of fancied greatness for himself?

SULPICIUS.

I know not which, great Nero.

NERO.

And did'st thou not advise me earnestly
To rid the state of such a pestilence?

SULPICIUS.

And still advise thee, Nero; for this Greek
Is dang'rous above all, who, with their lives,
Have yet paid forfeit for their strange belief.
They come: the prisoner in foreign garb
So closely wrapp'd, I scarcely see his face.

Enter Prisoner, *attended.*

PONTIFF.

If it in truth be he.

NERO.

[*To the* Pontiff.] Dost thou still doubt?
[*To the* Prisoner.] Stand forth, audacious rebel to my will!
Dost thou still brave it, false and subtle spirit?

CORDENIUS (*throwing off his Grecian cloak, and advancing to* NERO).

I am not false, Augustus, but if subtle,
Add to my punishment what shall be deem'd
Meet retribution. I have truly sworn,

Or to produce thy thrall, or, therein failing,
To give my life for his; and here I stand.
Ethocles, by a higher power than thine,
Is yet reserved for great and blessed ends.
Take thou the forfeit; I have kept my oath.

NERO.

I am amazed beyond the power of utt'rance!
Grows it to such a pitch that Rome's brave captains
Are by this wizard sorcery so charm'd?
Then it is time, good sooth! that sweeping vengeance
Should rid the earth of every tainted thing
Which that curst sect hath touch'd. Cordenius Maro,
Thou who hast fought our battles, graced our state,
And borne a noble Roman's honour'd name,
What, O what power could tempt thee to this shame?

CORDENIUS.

I have been tempted by that mighty Power,
Who gave to Rome her greatness, to the earth
Form and existence; yea, and to the soul
Of living, active man, sense and perception:
But not to shame, O Cæsar! not to shame!

NERO.

What, hast thou not become a Nazarene,
As now I apprehended? Say, thou hast not;

And tho' thy present act is most audacious,
Yet will I spare thy life.

CORDENIUS.

If thou would'st spare my life, and to that grace
Add all the wealth of Rome, and all the power
Of Rome's great Lord, I would not for the bribe
Be other than I am, or what I am
Basely deny.

NERO.

Thou art a Christian, then? Thou art a maniac!

CORDENIUS.

I am a man, who, seeing in the flames
Those dauntless Christians suffer, long'd to know
What power could make them brave the fear of death,
Disgrace, and infamy. — And I have learnt
That they adore a God, — one God, supreme,
Who, over all men, his created sons,
Rules as a father; and beholding sin,
Growth of corruption, mar this earthly race,
Sent down to earth his sinless heavenly Son,
Who left, with generous devoted love,
His state of exaltation and of glory,
To win them back to virtue, yea, to virtue
Which shall be crown'd with never-ending bliss.
I've learnt that they with deep adoring gratitude
Pay homage to that Son, the sent of God,
Who here became a willing sacrifice

To save mankind from sin and punishment,
And earn for them a better life hereafter,
When mortal life is closed. The heart's deep homage
Becoming well such creatures, so redeem'd.

NERO.

Out on that dreaming madness?

CORDENIUS.

Is it madness
To be the humble follower of Him,
Who left the bliss of heaven to be for us
A man on earth, in spotless virtue living
As man ne'er lived: such words of comfort speaking,
To rouse, and elevate, and cheer the heart,
As man ne'er spoke; and suff'ring poverty,
Contempt, and wrong, and pain, and death itself,
As man ne'er suffer'd? — O, if this be madness,
Which makes each generous impulse of my nature
Warm into ecstasy, each towering hope
Rise to the noblest height of bold conception;
That which is reason call'd, and yet has taught you
To worship different gods in every clime,
As dull and wicked as their worshippers,
Compared to it, is poor, confined, and mean,
As is the Scythian's curtain'd tent, compared
With the wide range of fair, expanded nature.

NERO.

Away, away! with all those lofty words!
They but bewilder thee.

CORDENIUS.

Yet hear them, Nero! O resist them not!
Perhaps they are appointed for thy good,
And for the good of thousands. When these hands
Which have so oft done Rome a soldier's service,
This tongue which speaks to thee, are turn'd to ashes,
What now appears so wild and fanciful,
May be remember'd with far other feelings.
It is not life that I request of Nero,
Altho' I said these hands have fought for Rome.
No; in the presence of these senators,
First bind thyself by every sacred oath
To give this body to the flames, then hear me;
O could I speak what might convince Rome's chief,
Her senators, her tribes, her meanest slaves,
Of Christ's most blessed truth, the fatal pile
Would be to me a car of joyful triumph,
Mounted more gladly than the laurell'd hero
Vaults to his envied seat, while Rome's throng'd streets
Resound his shouted name. Within me stirs
The spirit of truth and power which spoke to me,
And will upon thy mind.——

NERO.

I charge thee cease!

ORCERES.

Nay, Emperor! might I entreat for him?

CORDENIUS (*catching hold of* ORCERES *eagerly*).

Not for my life.

ORCERES.

No; not for that, brave Maro!
[*To* Nero.] Let me entreat that he may freely speak.
Fear'st thou he should convince thee by his words?
That were a foul affront to thine own reason,
Or to the high divinities of Rome.

NERO.

Cease, Prince of Parthia! nor too far presume
Upon a noble stranger's privilege.

PONTIFF.

Shall words so bold be to thine ear august
So freely utter'd with impunity?

ORCERES.

Pontiff; I much revere thy sacred office,
But scorn thy paltry words. Not freely speak!
Not with impunity! Is this a threat?
Let Rome's great master, or his angry slaves,
Shed one drop of my blood, and on our plains

Where heretofore full many a Roman corse,
With Parthian arrows pierced, have vultures fed,
Twice thirty thousand archers in array,
Each with his bow strain'd for the distant mark,
Shall quickly stand, impatient for revenge.
Not with impunity !

SULPICIUS.

Nay, nay, Orceres! with such haughty words
Thou'lt injure him thou plead'st for. Noble Cæsar!
Permit an aged man, a faithful servant,
To speak his thoughts. This brave deluded youth
Is now, as I sincerely do believe,
Beneath the power of strong and dire enchantment.
Hear not his raving words, but spare his life,
And when its power (for all delusion holds
Its power but for a season) shall be spent,
He will himself entreat your clemency,
And be again the soldier of the state,
Brave and obedient. Do not hear him now:
Command him to retire.

CORDENIUS.

I thank thee, good Sulpicius, but my life,
For which thou plead'st, take no account of that;
I yield it freely up to any death,
Cruel or merciful, which the decree
Of Cæsar shall inflict, for leave to speak

Ev'n but a few short moments. Princely Nero!
The strong enchantment which deludes my soul
Is, that I do believe myself the creature,
Subject and soldier, if I so may speak,
Of an Almighty Father, King, and Lord,
Before whose presence, when my soul shall be
Of flesh and blood disrobed, I shall appear,
There to remain with all the great and good
That e'er have lived on earth, yea, and with spirits,
Higher than earth e'er own'd, in such pure bliss
As human heart conceives not, — if my life,
With its imperfect virtue, find acceptance
From pard'ning love and mercy; but, if otherwise,
That I shall pass into a state of misery
With souls of wicked men and wrathful demons.
That I believe this earth on which we stand
Is but the vestibule to glorious mansions,
Thro' which a moving crowd for ever press;
And do regard the greatest Prince, who now
Inflicts short torment on this flesh, as one
Who but in passing rudely rends my robe.
And thinkest thou that I, believing this,
Will shrink to do His will whom I adore?
Or thinkest thou this is a senseless charm,
Which soon will pass away?

NERO.

High words, indeed, if resting on good proof!
A maniac's fancies may be grand and noble.

CORDENIUS.

Ay, now thou list'nest, as a man should listen,
With an enquiring mind. Let me produce
The proofs which have constrain'd me to believe,
From written lore and well attested facts; —
Let me produce my proofs, and it may be,
The Spirit of Truth may touch thy yielding heart,
And save thee from destruction.

NERO.

Ha! dost thou think to make of me a convert?
Away, weak fool! and most audacious rebel!
Give proofs of thy obedience, not thy faith,
If thou wouldst earn thy pardon.

CORDENIUS.

If thou condemn me in the flames to die,
I will and must obey thee; if to live,
Disgraced by pardon won thro' treachery
To God, my King supreme, and his bless'd Christ,
I am, indeed, thy disobedient rebel.

NERO.

And shall as such most dearly pay the forfeit.
Out! — take him from my presence till the time
Of public execution.
Cordenius Maro, thou shalt fall this day
By no ignoble foe; — a noble lion
Famish'd and fierce shall be thy adversary.
And dost thou smile and raise thy head at this,
In stately confidence?

CORDENIUS.

God will deliver me from every adversary.
And thou too smilest. — Yes; he will deliver
That which I call *myself*. For this poor form
Which vests me round, I give it to destruction
As gladly as the storm-beat traveller,
Who, having reached his destined place of shelter,
Drops at the door his mantle's cumbrous weight.

NERO (*going*).

Then to thy visionary hopes I leave thee,
Incorrigible man! Here, in this chamber
Keep him secure till the appointed hour.
[*To the* Officers, *&c.*
Off, good Sulpicius! hang not on me thus!

SULPICIUS.

O, mighty Cæsar! countermand your orders:
Delay it but a month, a week, a day.

[*Exeunt* NERO, SULPICIUS, *Senators, &c.* SULPICIUS *still keeping close to* NERO *in the act of supplication.* — ORCERES, CORDENIUS, *and Guards remain, the Guards standing respectfully at a distance in the back-ground.*

ORCERES.

Noble Cordenius! can thy martial spirit
Thus brook to be a public spectacle,
Fighting with savage beasts, the sport of fools,
Till thou shalt fall, deformed and horrible,
Mangled and piece-meal torn? It must not be.

CORDENIUS.

Be not so moved, Orceres; I can bear it:
The God I worship, who hath made me humble,
Hath made me dauntless too. And for the shame
Which, as I guess, disturbs thee most, my Master,
The Lord and Leader I have sworn to follow,
Did as a malefactor end his days,
To save a lost, perverted race: shall I
Feel degradation, then, in following him?

ORCERES.

In this, alas! thou'lt follow him too surely;
But whither, noble Maro?

CORDENIUS.

Ev'n to my destined home, my Father's house.

ORCERES.

And where is that? O, canst thou tell me where?
Beyond the ocean or beneath the earth?
Be there more worlds than this, beyond our ken
In regions vast, above the lofty stars?
Could we thro' the far stretch of space descry
Ev'n but the distant verge, tho' dimly mark'd,
Of any other world, I would believe
That virtuous men deceased have in good truth
A destined place of rest.

CORDENIUS.

Believe it — O, believe it, brave Orceres!

ORCERES.

I'll try to do it. I'll become a Christian,
Were it but only to defy this tyrant.

CORDENIUS.

Thou must receive with a far different spirit
The faith of Jesus Christ. Perhaps thou wilt.
My heart leaps at the thought. When I am dead,
Remain in Rome no longer. In the East
Search thou for Ethocles, whom I have rescued;
And if he shall convert thee, O, how richly
He will repay all I have done for him!
— But, I would now withdraw a little space,
To pour my thoughts in prayer and thankfulness
To Him, the great, the good, the wise, the just,
Who holds man's spirit in his own high keeping,
And now supports my soul, and will support it,
Till my appointed task is done. In secret
The hearts by Jesus taught were bid to pray,
And, if it be permitted, so will I.

[*To the Guards, who advance as he speaks to them.*

My guards and, some time past, my fellow-soldiers,
Let me remain alone a little while,
And fear not my escape. If ye distrust me,
Watch well the door, and bind my hands with chains.

FIRST OFFICER.

Yes, brave Cordenius, to another chamber
Thou mayst retire, and we will watch without.
But be thy person free: we will not bind,
With felon cord or chain, those valiant hands
Which have so often for thy country fought,
Until we are commanded.

CORDENIUS.

I thank ye all, my friends, and I believe
That I shall meet and thank ye too hereafter;
For there is something in you God must love,
And, loving, will not give to reprobation.
[*To* First Officer.
Codrus, thou once didst put thy life in hazard,
And sufferedst much to save a helpless Greek
Who sought protection of thee.
[*Turning to the* Second Officer.
Ay, and thou,
Young Lelius, once a rich and tempting ransom
Nobly remittedst to a wretched captive.
Ye are of those whom Jesus came to save:
Yes; we shall meet hereafter.
[*To* Third Officer.
And thou, my former enemy, weepest thou?
We're enemies no more; thou art my brother.
I will retire; my little term of life
Runs fleetly on; I must not spend it thus.
[*Exeunt.*

SCENE III.

A crowded Amphitheatre: NERO *and the Senators discovered in the back-ground sitting in state,* PORTIA *by the side of* NERO, *in the act of supplication.*

Enter SULPICIUS *on the front, meeting with another noble Roman.*

SULPICIUS (*eagerly*).

Is he advancing?

NOBLE ROMAN.

Yes, and close at hand,
Surrounded by a group of martial friends.
Oft have I seen him on a day of battle
March to the charge with noble portly gait,
But now he treads the ground with buoyant steps
Which from its surface spring, as tho' he press'd
Substance of renovating power. His form
Seems stately and enlarged beyond its wont;
And in his countenance, oft turn'd to heaven,
There is a look as if some god dwelt in him.

SULPICIUS.

How do the people greet him?

NOBLE ROMAN.

Every face
Gazing upon him, turns, with transit quick,
Pity to admiration. Warlike veterans
Are shedding tears like infants. As he passed
The Legion he commanded in Armenia,
They raised a shout as if a victor came,
Saluting him with long and loud applause,
None daring to reprove them.

[*Noise without of shoutings.*

Hark! he comes.

Enter CORDENIUS, *followed by* ORCERES *and* SYLVIUS, *and attended by other friends, with Guards, &c.*

SULPICIUS (*advancing eagerly to meet him*).

Cordenius, O Cordenius! hear a friend,

A faithful ancient friend; thy Portia's father!
At Nero's footstool she is pleading for thee,
And will not plead in vain, if thou wilt testify
A yielding mind, a willingness to live.

CORDENIUS.

I am so pleased to die, and am so honour'd
In dying for the pure and holy truth,
That nature's instinct seems in me extinguish'd.
But if the Emperor freely pardon me,
I shall believe it is the will of God
That I should yet on earth promote his service,
And, so believing, am content to live;
Living or dying, to his will resign'd.

Enter PORTIA *on the front, and catching hold of* CORDENIUS *with eagerness and great agitation.*

PORTIA.

Cordenius, thou art pardoned. Nero spares thee,
If thou wilt only say thou art a Roman,
In heart and faith as all thy fathers were,
Or but forbear to say thou art a Christian.

CORDENIUS.

Thanks, gentle Portia! life preserved by thee,
Even to be spent in want and contumely,
Rather than grieve thy kind and tender heart,
My dearest, gentlest friend! I had accepted:
But to deny my God, and put dishonour
Upon the noblest, most exalted faith
That ever was to human thoughts reveal'd,
Is what I will not — yea, and tho' a Roman,

A noble Roman, and a soldier too,
I dare not do. Let Nero have this answer.

PORTIA.

No, not this answer, Maro; not this answer!
Cast not life from thee, dear, most dear Cordenius!
Life, too, which I should spend my life in cheering,
Cast it not from thee like a worthless thing.

CORDENIUS.

Because it is not worthless but most precious,
And now, when dear to thee, more precious far
Than I have e'er esteem'd it, 'tis an offering
More meet for God's acceptance;
Withheld from him, not even thyself, sweet maid,
Couldst cheer its course, nor yet couldst thou be happy.

PORTIA.

Nay, but I could! — to see thee still alive,
And by my side, mine own redeemed friend,
Should I not then be happy?

CORDENIUS.

I should be by thy side, dear love! but thou,
With all thy excellence, couldst have no happiness,
Mated with one, whose living form alone
Could move upon the earth, whilst far adrift
His mind would dwell, by ceaseless meditation,
In other worlds of blessedness or woe;

Lost to the one, and to the other link'd
By horrid sympathy, till his wrench'd nature
Should to a demon's fell and restless spirit
At last be changed.

PORTIA.

Alas, alas! and dost thou then believe
That nought remains for thee but death or misery?

CORDENIUS.

No, gentle Portia! firmly I believe
That I shall live in endless happiness,
And with the blest hereafter shall behold
Thy blessed self with ecstasy of love,
Exceeding every thought of earth-born passion,
As the fair morning star in lovely brightness
Excels a night-fly, twinkling thro' the gloom.
Live in this hope, dear Portia! hold it fast;
And may His blessing rest upon thy head,
Who loves the loving and the innocent!
Farewell, in love and hope! farewell, in peace!
Farewell, in quick'ning faith, — in holy joy!

PORTIA (*clasping his knees*).

Nay, let me yet conjure thee!
Make me not wretched, me who once was happy,
Ay, happiest of all in loving thee.

CORDENIUS.

This is mine anguish and my suffering!
O, good Sulpicius! bear her to her home.

SULPICIUS (*leading her gently away, while she still clings to him*).

Forbear, my child, thy tears are all in vain.

Enter a Lictor.

LICTOR.

Cæsar forbids all further interruption
To his imperial sentence. Let Cordenius
Forthwith prepare him for the fatal fight.
This is mine office, and I must perform it.

[*Begins to disrobe* CORDENIUS, *while* PORTIA *shrieks aloud, and is carried off in the arms of her father.*

Disrobe thee, Maro, of those martial weeds.

CORDENIUS.

Gladly; for him I serve, — my glorious Master
Hath braced me with an armour that defies
All hostile things; in which I'll strive more proudly
Than I have ever fought in field or breach
With Rome's or Nero's foes.

LICTOR.

Cæsar desires thee also to remember,
That no ignoble audience, e'en thy Emperor,
And all the states of Rome, behold thy deeds.

CORDENIUS.

Tell him my deeds shall witness'd be by those
Compared to whom the Emperor of Rome,

With all her high estates, are but as insects
Hov'ring at mid-day o'er some tainted marsh.
I know full well that no ignoble audience
Are present, tho' from mortal eyes conceal'd.
Farewell, my friends! kind, noble friends, farewell!

[*Apart to* SYLVIUS, *while* ORCERES *goes off, re-appearing in another part of the theatre.*

Sylvius, farewell! If thou shouldst e'er be call'd
To die a holy Martyr for the truth,
God give thee then the joy which now I feel.
But keep thy faith conceal'd, till useful service
Shall call thee to maintain it. God be with thee!
[*Looking round.*
Where is Orceres gone? I thought him near me.

SYLVIUS.

'Tis but a moment since he left thy side
With eager haste.

CORDENIUS.

He would not see my death. I'm glad he's gone.
Say I enquired for him, and say I bless'd him.
— Now I am ready. Earthly friends are gone.
Angels and blessed spirits, to your fellowship
A few short pangs will bring me.
—O, Thou, who on the Cross for sinful men
A willing suff'rer hung'st! receive my soul!
Almighty God and Sire, supreme o'er all!
Pardon my sins and take me to thyself!

Accept the last words of my earthly lips:
High hallelujah to thy holy name!

[*A Lion now appears, issuing from a low door at the end of the Stage, and* CORDENIUS, *advancing to meet it, enters the Arena, when* ORCERES *from a lofty stand amongst the spectators, sends an arrow from his bow, which pierces* CORDENIUS *through the heart. He then disappears, and re-entering below, catches hold of his hand as* SYLVIUS *supports him from falling to the ground.*

ORCERES (*to* CORDENIUS).

Have I done well, my friend?—this is a death
More worthy of a Roman.
I made a vow in secret to my heart,
That thou shouldst ne'er be made a mangled sight
For gazing crowds and Nero's ruthless eye.

SYLVIUS.

That dying look, which almost smiles upon thee,
Says that thou hast done well; tho' words no more
May pass from these closed lips, whose last, bless'd utterance
Was the soul's purest and sublimest impulse.

[*The Curtain drops.*

NOTE TO THE DRAMA.

For the better understanding of different allusions in the foregoing drama, I beg to transcribe a few passages from Fox's History of Martyrs, taken from Book I., which contains an account of the ten persecutions of the primitive church.

He says, on the authority of Justin Martyr, — "And whether earthquake, pestilence, or whatever public calamity befell, it was attributed to the Christians;" (then is added) "over and besides all these, a great occasion that stirred up the emperors against the Christians came by one Publius Tarquinius, the chief prelate of the idolatrous sacrifices, and Mamertinus, the chief governor of the city, in the time of Trajanus, who, partly with money, partly with sinister, pestilent counsaile, partly with infamous accusations, (as witnesseth Nauclerus,) incensed the mind of the emperor so much against God's people."

In the account of the third persecution (An. 100), Eustasius, a great and victorious captain, is mentioned as suffering martyrdom by order of the Emperor Adrian, who went to meet him on his return from conquest over the barbarians, but upon Eustasius's refusing on the way to do sacrifice to Apollo for his victory, brought him to Rome and had him put to death.

In the fourth persecution (An. 162), it is mentioned that many Christian soldiers were found in the army of Marcus Aurelius.

"As these aforesaid were going to their execution there was a certain souldiour who in their defence took part against those who rayled upon them, for the which cause the people

crying out against him, he was apprehended, and being constant in his profession, was forthwith beheaded."

In the persecutions of Decius several soldiers are mentioned as martyrs, some of whom had before concealed their faith; and in the tenth persecution, Mauritius, the captain of the Theban band, with his soldiers, to the number of 6666 (a number probably greatly exaggerated), are recorded as having been slain as martyrs by the order of Maximinian.

Tertullian, in his Apology for the Christians, mentions the slanderous accusations against them, of putting to death children and worshipping an ass's head. And when we consider how fond the ignorant are of excitement arising from cruel, absurd, and wonderful stories, and how easily a misapprehended and detached expression may be shaped by conjecture into a detailed transaction, such accusations were very probable and might be naturally expected; particularly when the unoffending meekness of their behaviour made supposed hidden atrocities more necessary for the justification of their persecutors.

THE END.

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